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TRAGEDY

I. THE ORIGINS OF TRAGEDY

The documented history of Greek tragedy begins in 472 B.C. with Aeschylus' *Persae*. Of his earlier career we know little; we know something but not much about one or two of his contemporaries; we have a date (536/533) for the institution of a competition in tragedy at the Great Dionysia. The origins of tragedy lie in the sixth century. So complex, however, and so obscure is the evidence, so various are the theories advanced, that the hardened scholar approaches this subject with dismay.[1]

The surviving plays of Aeschylus tell us what needs to be explained. There is a chorus, dramatized as the play demands. Their songs are elaborate and bulk large and, in pre-Aeschylean tragedy, may have bulked larger, since Aristotle informs us that Aeschylus reduced the choral element and 'gave the leading role to the spoken word'.[2] For the earlier plays two actors are required (either of whom could, with a change of mask and costume, take more than one part). Aeschylus is said himself to have added the second actor and either he or Sophocles the third, and Aeschylus uses three in his later plays.[3] The actors deliver speeches, often of considerable length and formality, but also enter into dialogue with the coryphaeus (chorus-leader) or with the other actor. Particularly characteristic are passages of line-by-line interchange (stichomythia) which, like the narrative speech, remains a formal convention of tragedy as long as we know it and may well go back to its earliest beginnings. The plays (except *Agamemnon*) are of moderate length, rather over 1,000 lines. In what kind of performances did plays like these originate?

It is easy to list contributory influences. (i) Tragedy took its stories, with few exceptions, from mythology. These stories had been treated by the epic poets, Homer and the Cycle and other epics now lost; and Aristotle, with a sure instinct, regarded the Homeric handling of myth as a prototype of tragedy.[4] But myth

[1] For bibliography see Appendix. [2] *Poetics* 1449a17f.

[3] *Poetics* 1449a18 (with note in D. W. Lucas's edition).

[4] *Poetics passim*. A famous Aeschylean trilogy now lost clearly followed the plot of the *Iliad* very closely.

had also been treated by lyric poets. It seems that, from an early stage, it had been characteristic of hymns and other types of choral lyric poetry to contain a narrative; and Stesichorus had developed lyric narrative on a big scale. One could say that the stories came to the tragedians rough-shaped for drama by epic and lyric poets. (ii) The choral songs of tragedy, metrically complex and linguistically rich, written in a literary dialect which is not pure Attic (using, for instance, the α of the lyric *koine* for Ionic-Attic η),[1] are clearly indebted to the choral lyric tradition of the Peloponnesian and western Greeks: Attica had no great tradition of the kind. (iii) For a noble rhetoric in spoken iambic trimeters we must look elsewhere. Aristotle thought – it may or may not have been a guess – that the original dialogue metre of tragedy was the trochaic tetrameter.[2] Both the tetrameter and the trimeter had developed in Ionia, at the hands of Archilochus and his successors, but tragic trimeters may have owed most to Solon who, at the turn of the seventh and sixth centuries, had elevated the metre to be a medium of political exhortation.

It is easy to list these influences: but on what were they brought to bear? Few today would agree with Murray in deriving tragedy from a ritual passion play.[3] Aristotle, on what evidence we do not know, believed that it originated by extemporization on the part of 'those who led the dithyramb'; and the dithyramb was a choral hymn to Dionysus, which is likely to have included a narrative. Ignorant as we are about early dithyramb, it seems likely that the burden was carried by the leader and the main function of the chorus was to utter conventional refrains. But how does a choral performance, even with mimetic dancing (the extent of which we cannot judge), become a drama? There was a tradition, known apparently to Aristotle (though not mentioned in his extant works), current in the Hellenistic period and adopted by Horace in his *Ars poetica* (275–7), which ascribed this development to a certain Thespis from the country-deme of Icaria in Attica. There are many obscurities in the various accounts, but we must suppose that he separated himself from the chorus which he led (what kind of chorus we are not told), assumed a dramatic role and addressed speeches to the chorus: in other words, he stopped singing a story and began to act it. He brought his new invention to Athens, in mid-sixth century or later, where he acted before and after the institution of competitions.

The role of the actor was at first strictly relative to the chorus. The word for actor is *hypokrites*, the sense of which is debated. Some scholars think that it means 'interpreter': the actor elucidated the complexities of the mythical story, partly perhaps through a spoken prologue. (Whether early tragedy had a prologue is itself debated, since two of the surviving plays of Aeschylus, including the earliest, open with the entry of the chorus.) There is still, how-

[1] Cf. Björck (1950). [2] *Poetics* 1449a21.
[3] For criticism of this and other theories see *DTC* 174ff.

ever, much to be said for the view that *hypokrites* means 'answerer'. He answers the questions of the chorus and so evokes their songs. He answers with a long speech about his own situation or, when he enters as messenger, with a narrative of disastrous events; or else he submits to a catechism in stichomythia. Naturally, the transformation of the leader into an actor entailed a dramatization of the chorus, which was easy enough if a citizen-chorus became the spokesmen of a city. The process envisaged, if rather vague, is plausible enough. The problem, however, is complicated in several ways, all controversial.

Thespis was an Athenian, and tragedy was generally regarded as an Attic product. But Aristotle tells us that some of the Dorians in the Peloponnese laid claim to tragedy.[1] There is indeed elusive evidence bearing on tragedy from just those parts of the Peloponnese which were nearest to Attica: from Corinth, Sicyon and Phlius. At Corinth Arion was a notable figure in the days of Periander; that he helped to turn a primitive extemporized dithyramb into an elaborate form of art is beyond doubt. Herodotus tells us this, and only this, but a later writer gives Solon, in his elegies, as the authority for saying that Arion put on 'the first drama of tragedy'. Solon cannot have used the phrase but must have said something to evoke it. The Suda-lexicon mentions Arion's work on dithyramb (clearly following Herodotus), but also says that he was the discoverer of the tragic mode or style (*tropos*), whatever that may mean, and that he brought on the stage 'satyrs speaking verse'.[2] Obscure though this all is (the last words sound like a quotation from comedy),[3] the combination of dithyramb, tragedy and satyrs in one notice is bound to be suggestive. At neighbouring Sicyon, Herodotus tells us that the tyrant Cleisthenes, at war with Argos, wishing to suppress the worship of the Argive *heros* Adrastus whose sufferings were honoured with 'tragic choruses', gave them over to Dionysus.[4] What was it about these choruses that caused the friend of Sophocles to call them tragic? Finally, Pratinas of Phlius is said to have been the first to write satyr plays; and the presumption is that he introduced them from his native city to Athens, where he also practised as a tragedian in the early fifth century. One problem leads into another.

The evidence of Aristotle's *Poetics* is not lightly to be disregarded. Not only does he tell us that tragedy arose from the 'leaders of the dithyramb' but he also uses, mysteriously, the adjective 'satyric' (*satyrikos*): he says that tragedy, beginning with short 'myths' (plots or stories) and ridiculous language, was late in attaining dignity through a change out of a 'satyric' state (or performance), and he adds that the tetrameter was used first because the 'poetry' was 'satyric' and 'more danceable'.[5] Aristotle may, but need not, have meant that tragedy

[1] *Poetics* 1448a29–b2.

[2] Herodotus 1.23; Joannes Diaconus, *Comm. in Hermogenem*, ed. H. Rabe, *Rh.M.* 63 (1908) 150; Suda s.v. 'Arion'.

[3] An anapaestic tetrameter? [4] Herodotus 5.67. [5] *Poetics* 1449a20, 22.

developed out of a dithyramb sung and danced by a satyr chorus; if he did, he could have been right or wrong. There is little or no independent evidence for a satyric dithyramb, but naturally we think of the notice which associates Arion with dithyramb, tragedy and satyrs. At this point in the argument looms up the grotesque shadow of a goat. The members of a tragic chorus were 'goat-singers' (*tragoːidoi*). Were they so called because they sang in goatskins or for a goat-prize or in connexion with a goat-sacrifice? Or because they were masquerading as goat-like demons? This sounds attractive but encounters the difficulty that Attic satyrs or *silenoi* had horses' tails. But they were conceived as shaggy and lustful; nor need we rule out this association simply because tragedy became sober and serious. Not only is the evidence on satyrs complex and disputed (see pp. 94ff.), but we are confronted with a basic dilemma. The fact that, in the competition, three tragedies were followed by a satyr play, that satyr plays were written by the same poets as tragedy, on stories drawn from the same fount, and were governed broadly by the same conventions, strongly suggests, if it does not prove, that there was a genetic connexion between the two forms. On the other hand, the members of a satyr chorus are already masked and 'dramatized' as satyrs – a serious obstacle to their re-dramatization as elders (or whatever it might be); and it can be argued that out of a satyr chorus no kind of drama could develop other than a satyr play, which did in fact so develop, perhaps at Phlius. *Non liquet*: neither the degree to which choral performances had approximated to drama in the Peloponnese nor the question whether dithyramb and tragedy shared a satyric background with satyr play can be determined on the evidence.

All three forms, along with comedy, were from the beginning, and remained, part of the cult of Dionysus. The myths sung in dithyramb and then acted in tragedy may originally have been taken from Dionysiac legend, but of these there was a limited supply. The proverbial expression 'nothing to do with Dionysus' (οὐδὲν πρὸς τὸν Διόνυσον) may suggest that the introduction of non-Dionysiac myths gave rise to protest, but this is likely to have happened fairly early in both contexts. In point of theme, tragedy moved away from Dionysus. But was its nature and character, its emotional impact, still in any degree determined by its Dionysiac associations? That there was a political factor is fairly clear. The cult of Dionysus was popular and may have been encouraged by tyrants seeking popular support, as a counterpoise perhaps to established cults under aristocratic control. We have seen some hint of this at Corinth and Sicyon; and at Athens the establishment of tragedy clearly owed much to Pisistratus and his sons (under whom Lasus of Hermione was active in the field of dithyramb). To suggest that their motives were purely political, that they had no concern to promote these new developments of that traditional choral art so intimately bound up with the cultural life of archaic Greece, might be

unfair. It is likely, however, to have been under the Cleisthenic democracy that tragedy attained the greater dignity and seriousness of which Aristotle speaks; and one may speculate, if hazardously, about the effect on tragedy of a new social climate in which responsibility for grave decisions was placed upon the body of citizens meeting in the assembly – citizens who would then, at the festivals, meet in the theatre of Dionysus to hear and watch the tragedies.

Certainly, by 472 tragedy had become highly serious, political (in some sense) – and religious. Religious it had always been as part (like comedy) of a cult; and it was no doubt to cult that it owed those masks which became progressively less appropriate to the kind of plays which were written. It cannot be too strongly insisted, however, that tragedy was not itself a ritual,[1] having none of that rigid repetitive character by which ritual is marked, though tragedies did incorporate ritual features if the action so demanded (and choral odes often take the form of hymns and use hymn-language). Nor should we attribute to Dionysus both a hypothetical early grotesquerie and the later seriousness, which tragedy will have owed far more to the fact that it used and interpreted myths that were themselves impregnated with religion and had been treated lyrically in religious contexts, and to a tradition of thought upon great issues of human destiny and divine government which descended to the tragic poets from thinkers such as Hesiod and Solon. The tradition runs from them to Aeschylus.

How much tragedy owed to the sheer genius of Aeschylus, with what truth Murray called him 'the creator of tragedy', is not demonstrable, since we know so little of his predecessors and contemporaries.[2] It is just possible that four mythological play-titles (including *Pentheus*) attributed to Thespis are genuine, but nothing secure can be said about the character of his plays. Choerilus is little more than a name: he is said to have competed with Pratinas and Aeschylus in 499/496. Of Pratinas it is said that 32 of his 50 plays were satyric, which, if true, means that he cannot have operated entirely within the normal fifth-century Attic scheme. There is one substantial and very interesting fragment under his name, in which a chorus of satyrs protest that their words are being drowned by the *aulos*-accompaniment. That this comes from a satyr play rather than a lyric is pure surmise, and it has recently been suggested, with great plausibility, that the fragment really belongs to the late fifth century and has been wrongly attributed to this Pratinas.[3] Of Phrynichus, who won his first victory 511/508 and must have been senior to Aeschylus, we know a little more and get the impression of a considerable figure. In 493, during the archonship of Themistocles, he produced 'The capture of Miletus' (Μιλήτου ἅλωσις), as a result of which he was fined, says Herodotus, by the Athenians for 'having reminded the citizens of their own misfortunes'.[4] In 476 (probably), with

[1] Cf. Vickers (1973) 41f.
[2] For bibliography see Appendix.
[3] Cf. Lloyd-Jones (1966) 15–18.
[4] Herodotus 6.21.

Themistocles as *choregos*, he won a victory with *Phoenissae*, on the theme of Salamis. He also wrote on normal mythical subjects, about the Danaids, about Actaeon, and others. From Aristophanes we learn that his songs were still famous and sung in the late fifth century.[1] That is, however, no ground for asserting that his plays were more lyrical than dramatic. What kind of plays he wrote, and with what tragic content, we simply do not know,[2] except that he twice used contemporary themes and showed the way for Aeschylus' *Persae*.

2. TRAGEDY IN PERFORMANCE

Anyone who asks: What was Greek tragedy like? What was its effect, in performance? will find the business of answering these questions somewhat frustrating. For we are the prisoners of our evidence, which is everywhere slighter than we could wish, often much later than the period we are chiefly concerned with (the fifth century B.C.), and almost always difficult to interpret. There are all too many vital questions which we cannot answer without some measure of guesswork and speculation, nor without relying on *a priori* assumptions whose validity we can never adequately test. And yet it is essential that we do raise these questions, or else the texts of Greek tragedy must remain inert, like musical scores which we cannot and do not even try to perform. For the texts are essentially scripts for performance, and the style and context of that performance are fundamental to our understanding of the texts themselves.

We can roughly classify our evidence under three heads: the discoveries and conclusions of archaeological research, later tradition about the theatre, and the play texts themselves. Each kind of evidence has its own pitfalls. The evidence of archaeology is itself of two rather different kinds. The first depends on the conclusions to be drawn from the excavation of theatre sites, the second upon the interpretation of visual imagery drawing on the theatre which appears in the painted pottery of fifth-century Attica (and to a lesser extent in other pottery) and also in the relief sculpture and terracotta figures of the late fifth and fourth centuries.

The first stone-built theatre in Athens was the work of the late fourth century, in the decade which saw Athens fall under the domination of Macedon: the site was almost totally reworked in later centuries. Earlier performances, and thus all those in the period which most interests us, relied largely on temporary constructions in wood, which have left little or no trace in the archaeological record. Late tradition connected the earliest performances of tragedy at Athens

[1] *Wasps* 220; *Birds* 748ff.

[2] Unless we attribute to him a papyrus fragment containing part of a tragedy based on the story of Gyges (cf. Herodotus 1.8ff.). Scholars are not agreed whether this is a work of the early fifth century or of the Hellenistic period. For bibliography see Appendix.

with the *agora*: we have no reason to doubt the tradition, but the raised platforms for the performers and tiers of wooden seating for the audience have left no mark behind. For most of the fifth century the performances took place in the theatre of Dionysus at the foot of the southern cliff of the Acropolis, where an acting area had been terraced up with a stone retaining wall, but the theatre 'building', the *skene*, at the end of the century was still of wood on a stone foundation, and we can learn very little for certain from what is left of those foundations about the nature of the wooden building above. The evidence of vases and other representations is somewhat better, even if it is thin. Theatre scenes, which characteristically represent actors and chorus-men seen off-stage, before or after performance, occur as early as the first surviving plays of Aeschylus (perhaps earlier), and we have a number of such scenes covering most of the fifth century. But there is a problem of deciding what is relevant: it is never easy to distinguish between pictures of actors presenting roles from the heroic repertory of Greek tragedy and scenes showing the heroic figures themselves, with the artist influenced perhaps by dramatic performance in his imagining of the scene. Before we can be sure that what is being presented to us is a scene of actors and not of mythical figures, we have to have undeniably 'theatrical' features present (dressing scenes, unmistakable masks, or the figure of the *auletes*, the musician who played the double pipe that accompanied sung scenes in Greek tragedy). And even then we have always to reckon with the play of the artist's imagination and with the conventions within which he worked.

With the evidence of later tradition our problems are different again. Here, with the exception of Aristotle, we are dealing with antiquarians, men of the Hellenistic or Roman periods assembling a miscellany of information, almost entirely from their reading, in order to produce encyclopaedias and commentaries which would make intelligible a vanished past. For the most part we can assume that their first-hand knowledge, even of the contemporary theatre, is nil, and we cannot read their sources and assure ourselves of their reliability: often we do not even know to what period their information refers, and this last point is crucial since theatrical productions and indeed the actual pieces performed had changed radically by, say, the second century B.C., let alone by the second or third century A.D. Their evidence can never be used to contradict the evidence of archaeology; it can sometimes fill gaps in that evidence.

Our last category of evidence, that of the play texts themselves, raises problems that are like those we encounter when we try to interpret the painted scenes on pottery: how do we separate the theatrical experience presented solely through the playwright's imaginative use of language from what was there, in concrete fact, before the audience's eyes? In a masked drama, as Greek drama was, it is obvious enough that some things evoked in the play text, such as tears or smiles, existed only in language and in gesture, and did not, in the literal sense,

'happen'. But how are we to decide, for example, how much of the scene evoked by the chorus in the Parodos of Euripides' *Ion*, the temple sculpture of Delphi to whose detail they respond with such emotion, or of the complex cave setting in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, was actually represented in the stage construction of the late fifth-century theatre? What of the presentation of dramatic events such as the earthquake in *Prometheus vinctus*, or Orestes' shooting his arrows at the Furies in the mad scene of Euripides' *Orestes*?[1] As we shall see, these are not easy questions to answer.

The first thing we have to take account of in trying to assess the impact of Greek tragedy as it was experienced in performance is the context of that experience, the place of tragic drama in the life of the Athenian community. Though it was not itself a liturgical, ritual act (see p. 5 above), it was nevertheless part of the worship of divinity, a sacred event with its place fixed in the religious calendar of Athens, and marked as sacred by the actual rituals which surrounded it (such as the torchlight procession in which Dionysus' statue was brought from the altar on the road to Eleutherae to his theatre in Athens, the great phallic procession on the first day of the Dionysia, and the sacrificial rites of purifying the theatre), as well as by the suspension of profane activities of the community during the festival. A second important aspect of the dramatic experience also derives from its social context: it is the analogy with the great religious contests of the Greek world, such as the Olympic and Pythian 'games'. In both, the endemic and potentially disruptive competitiveness of ancient Greek society was validated and sanctified by dedicating conspicuous display of competitive achievement to the worship of the gods. The dramatic performances of Athens, like the athletic contests, took much of their meaning for those who witnessed them from being contests in achievement before the eyes of the community. Playwrights, actors and *choregoi* (Athenians who displayed their wealth by paying lavishly for the costs of performance) were all taking part in competition with one another and the 'victories' of each were publicly proclaimed and attested in the records of the Athenian polis and in conspicuous private monuments alike. The role of the audience, thought of as both 'the Athenians' and 'the Greeks', is to give its recognition to the triumphant prowess of the victor, and, conversely, to deride unmercifully the humiliation of the defeated.

The very size of the audience at Athens (perhaps 15,000) made it natural and indeed accurate to think of the performances as an expression of the Athenian people's solidarity and as an act of the community, with two aspects; the first an act of celebration honouring the gods, and the second the provision of an arena for the acknowledgement of prestige and standing within the community.

[1] Eur. *Ion* 184ff.; Soph. *Phil.* 15ff.; Aesch. *P.V.* 1080ff.; Eur. *Orestes* 253ff.

Both aspects are reflected in the fact that, as we learn from Aristotle, the organization of the festival, the processions and the dramatic performances, was one of the major responsibilities of the archon, the chief magistrate of Athens.[1] The same two aspects of the dramatic performances also mean that, though they represented something radically new in form and presentation, the tragic competitions were rooted in tradition. The plays themselves not only draw heavily on traditional stories and on the traditions of religious imagery which gave those stories much of their significance, but also, in enacting heroic struggle both of man against man and of men against all that is alien to man, contribute to the reinforcing of the traditional values of ancient Greek society, even though the traditional values are at the same time subjected to scrutiny through the constant reshaping of myth. For the whole community, represented in the audience, the performances of tragedy constitute a fusion of the traditional past with a new, innovating present.

This is to put the double-sidedness of past and present, tradition and change, in sociological terms. We can see it equally clearly expressed in the concrete realities of the place and circumstances of performance. The centre of the performance space is the level circular area of the *orchestra*, the dancing-floor, now vanished at Athens in the re-ordering of the theatre of Dionysus for later styles of performance, but present and unaltered in the best preserved of Greek theatres, the theatre of Epidaurus (Pl. I*a* and Fig. 1). This was built probably no earlier than the third century B.C., to plans by an otherwise unknown architect, Polyclitus, but was already famous in later antiquity for the beauty and symmetry of its architectural composition.[2] The *orchestra* is the focal point of the whole design. It measures some twenty metres in diameter (the *orchestra* at Athens was probably a little larger), and is almost two-thirds enclosed by the rising tiers of the auditorium, in the shape of a cone, inverted and truncated. The origins of the *orchestra* are very much earlier than those of drama; in all probability they are to be found in the circular threshing-floors, often terraced out of the hillside, which are dotted in large numbers over the Greek landscape. As well as being the place for threshing grain or drying grapes and figs, such threshing-floors were a place for dancing. Dancing upon a circular floor, with a crowd of spectators surrounding it, is figured in the design of the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*: 'a dancing-floor like the one Daedalus made in the wide town of Cnossus', on which the dancers circle effortlessly 'like the wheel of a potter when he crouches and works it with his hands to see if it will run' (18.590ff.). Upon such a floor the chorus of tragedy moves: it is the fixed and essential element in the construction of a theatre for dramatic performances. By contrast the ground for spectators might vary considerably in shape and siting. After the abandonment of temporary wooden stands, spectators were almost

[1] Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.* 56.2–5. [2] Pausanias 2.27.5.

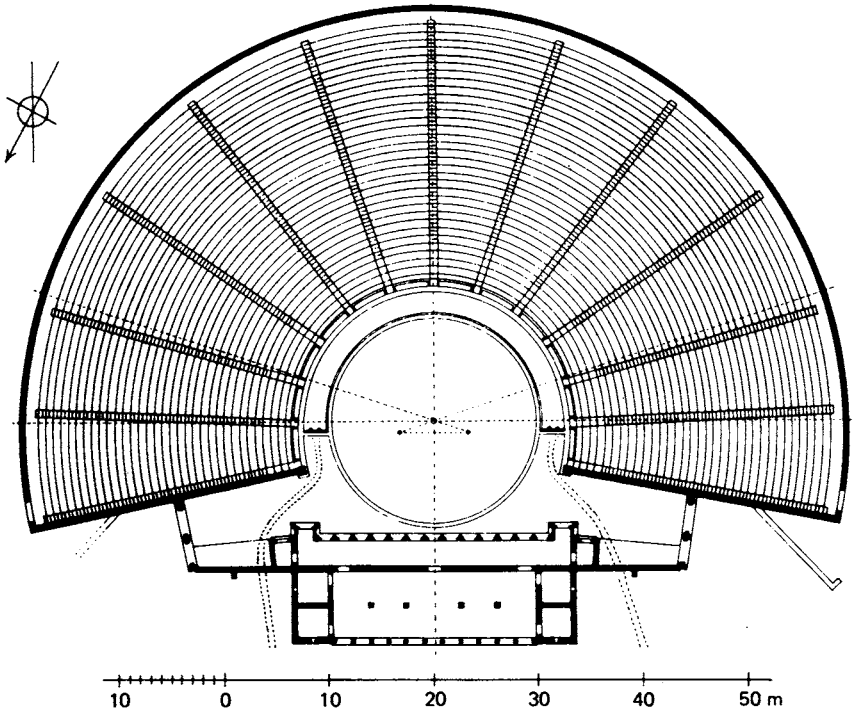

Fig. 1 The theatre of Epidaurus.

always placed on a hillside, usually curving but often far from the symmetrically graded and curving auditorium at Epidaurus: at Athens the curve is noticeably flatter, hardly more than half enclosing the *orchestra*, with acoustics that can never have been as good as those at Epidaurus, while local village theatres, such as the late sixth-century theatre at Thoricus in Attica, might be wholly lacking in symmetry.[1] Orientation also varied very widely: the theatre at Athens faced roughly south-south-east, while that at Epidaurus was almost diametrically opposed, facing north-north-west. In every case the orientation of the most appropriate hillside determined that of the theatre: at Athens the theatre overlooked the sacred precinct of Dionysus and his archaic temple, while at Epidaurus the sanctuary of Asclepius lay only some 500 metres away below the theatre.

The circular form of the *orchestra* is related to the ring-dances of early Greek folk celebration, and the traditional dance pattern was retained in the circling dance of the fifth-century dithyramb. Dithyrambic competitions for choruses of men and boys, each fifty strong, representing the ten tribes of Attica, also formed part of the celebrations in honour of Dionysus, and seem to have taken

[1] For the date of the theatre at Thoricus, see T. Hackens in Mussche et al. (1965) 75–96.

place in the theatre of Dionysus on the same days as performances of drama. But the chorus of tragedy characteristically moved in line, like a military unit parading, and did not, except rarely, reflect the traditional plan retained in the *orchestra* circle. It was also very much smaller (probably twelve in the plays of Aeschylus; fifteen in the later plays of Sophocles and Euripides), and had consequently a relatively much larger space in which to move.

The sense of openness of space pervades the performances of tragedy; open, not only to the light of the sky, with a total absence of walls or roof to give a feeling of enclosure, but also with open sight lines which converge from every angle on the huge, uncluttered *orchestra* and what lay beyond it. It is with the question of what lay beyond that our difficulties of interpretation begin. At a tangent to the *orchestra* circle but set back a little from its edge there was, by the time of the *Oresteia* at least (458 B.C.), the theatre building called the *skene*, and on either side of it, in the space between it and the forward edge of the half-circle of spectators, two open passage ways by which actors could enter the acting area from outside the theatre. These are the *eisodoi*, the entry passages, and at Epidaurus they pass through formal gateways of stone which stand at right-angles to the supporting wall of the auditorium. Since the late fifth-century *skene* at Athens was built of wood, there are questions we cannot very well answer as to its height and external appearance, the number of doors and other openings in it, and its painted decoration. It was a solid construction, of fairly substantial timbers, but could be taken down between festivals;[1] it seems to have had a flat roof, strong enough to support several actors upon it, and at least one double doorway facing the spectators. It is probable that from the first some such building served as a store-room for masks, costumes and props, and as a green room for actors preparing to make their entries. But we cannot be certain how early it came to be part of the fixed and accepted design of a theatre area or how it was at first interpreted. In Aeschylus' earliest surviving play, *Persae*, it has been convincingly argued that the action of the first part of the play is to be somewhat loosely imagined as taking place inside, not in front of, a building: this is certainly the most obvious and least strained interpretation of the words of the chorus of Persian elders in council with Xerxes' mother, Atossa: τόδ' ἐνεζόμενοι στέγος ἀρχαῖον 'sitting in (near? on?) this ancient building' (140f.). In that case, the *skene* was presumably either not yet in a position behind them as the spectators viewed the scene, or at least not thought of as part of the imagined scene of action, but rather as a non-dramatic piece of theatre equipment, like the banks of spotlights and floods in a modern theatre. But by the early 450s at least the *skene* is thought of as bounding the scene of action and in certain moments part of it. It may represent a building (commonly a palace or a temple) or the background of a scene of seashore or of mountainside. Entrances

[1] Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 6.1.54.